

BEWARE OF HYPER DISPENSATIONALISM

Updated and enlarged March 12, 2008 (Updated July 10, 2003; first published February 7, 2002)
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The following is an excerpt from our book “How to Study the Bible.” For more about
Dispensationalism, see the article “Study the Bible Dispensationally.”

“Hyper-dispensationalism” is characterized by making a sharp division between the ministry of Christ and that of the Apostles, and of further dividing Paul’s teaching from that of Peter and the other apostles. Some of the well-known teachers of hyper- or ultra-dispensationalism are E.W. Bullinger, Cornelius Stam, J.C. O’Hair, Charles Welch, Otis Sellers, A.E. Knoch, and Charles Baker. There are many varieties of hyper-dispensationalism, but the following are some of the characteristics:

(1) The four Gospels are entirely Jewish and contain no direct teaching for the churches. Yet, the writer of Hebrews said that the same gospel of salvation that was preached by the apostles was preached by Christ (Heb. 2:3-4). Though we know that Christ presented Himself to the Jewish nation and we do understand that there are differences between the gospels and the epistles, yet in Hebrews 2 we do not see a sharp delineation between the gospel preached by Christ and that preached by the apostles who followed. In fact, the Gospel of John presents exactly the same gospel as that preached by Paul. Further, 1 Timothy 6:3 shows that Christ spoke directly to the church age.

(2) The book of Acts is also largely Jewish. Hyper-dispensationalists commonly believe that after Christ was rejected by Israel in the Gospels, that they were given a second chance to receive the kingdom in the first part of the book of Acts. Thus, they teach that there are two different churches viewed in the book of Acts, and the true Pauline church only started after Acts 9, 13, or 28. The church mentioned in the first part of Acts allegedly refers to a different church than that of Paul’s prison epistles. The earlier “church” in Acts is simply an aspect of the kingdom preached in the Gospels. Most of the book of Acts is therefore discounted as a guideline for the churches today. Yet, at the very end of the book of Acts we still find Paul preaching about the kingdom (Acts 28:23). In fact, he was still preaching about it in his epistles! (2 Thess. 1:5; 2 Tim. 4:1). While we can see an obvious transition in the book of Acts, and not everything in Acts continues to be in effect in the churches today (e.g., tongues speaking and apostolic sign gifts) this does not mean that there are different gospels and different churches in various parts of Acts. The book of Acts is a book about and for the churches. The pattern of the first church as described in Acts 2 is the pattern for the churches throughout the age, except for the temporary and unique aspects pertaining to the coming of the Holy Spirit and the apostolic miracles.

(3) The mysteries given to Paul are a different revelation from that given to Peter and the other Apostles, and only Paul’s writings are directly for the church today. The other epistles, such as Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, and the epistles of John are not for us today in a direct sense. Yet, Paul himself said that the church is built upon the “apostleS” plural and not merely upon himself (Eph. 2:20) and the mysteries were “revealed unto his holy apostleS and prophetS” (Eph. 3:5) and not to him

alone. Peter also referred to the writings of Paul and made no distinction between Paul's teaching and the teaching of the other apostles (2 Pet. 3:1-2, 15-16). Peter said Paul wrote to the same people and preached the same message. Though we know that Paul was the special apostle of the Gentiles and he was given unique revelations about the church as the body of Christ, his revelations in no way contradict the revelations given in the General Epistles (Hebrews - Jude).

(4) The gospel preached by Peter in the early part of the book of Acts is different from the gospel preached by Paul. Yet, there is actually no difference between the gospel preached by Peter and that which Paul preached. Peter preached salvation through the blood of Christ (1 Pet. 1:2), salvation by God's free mercy (1 Peter 1:3), the new birth (1 Peter 1:3), eternal security because of the resurrection of Christ (1 Pet. 1:3-4). Acts 15 plainly states that all of the apostles, including Peter and Paul, agreed on the gospel. Paul plainly said in 1 Cor. 15:11-14 that they all preached the same gospel. Even in Acts 2, Peter was preaching the gospel of the grace of Christ rather than a "kingdom gospel." He preached Christ -- His crucifixion (Acts 2:23), resurrection (Acts 2:24-32), ascension and Lordship (Acts 2:33-36). He preached that the people should repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38). This is not a "kingdom gospel." Further, Paul states in Galatians 1, that anyone who preached a different gospel was cursed. If Peter were truly preaching a different gospel in those days, he would have fallen under this curse.

(5) Baptism and the Lord's Supper were given to Paul before he received the church age mysteries; thus they are not for the churches today. Hyper-dispensationalists differ on this point. Some accept both baptism and the Lord's Supper; some reject water baptism and the Lord's Supper altogether; while others reject only baptism and keep the Lord's Supper.

(6) According to hyper-dispensationalism there are different ways of salvation in the Old Testament and during the Tribulation. Peter Ruckman, for example, teaches that men were saved by faith plus works in the Old Testament and that they will be saved by faith plus works in the Tribulation and by works alone in the Millennium. In Millions Disappear: Fact or Fiction? Ruckman says: "If the Lord comes and you remain behind, then start working like a madman to get to heaven, because you're going to have to. ... You must keep the Ten Commandments (all of them, Ecclesiastes 12:13), keep the Golden Rule (1 John 3:10), give your money to the poor, get baptized, take up your cross, hold out to the end of the Tribulation, wait for Jesus Christ to show up at the Battle of Armageddon, and be prepared to die for what you believe. In the Tribulation you cannot be saved by grace alone, like you could before the Rapture." In fact, Romans 4:1-8 plainly states that Abraham before the law and David under the law were saved by faith without works. This is the only plan of salvation God ever has had and ever will have--salvation by grace alone through faith alone based upon the shed blood of Jesus Christ alone. The Old Testament saints did not know what the New Testament saint knows, but Romans 4 makes it plain that they were saved by faith without works. Like Abraham, they believed God and it was counted unto them for righteousness. Those who are saved in the Tribulation will also be saved through faith in God's Word and by the blood of Jesus Christ and through this alone (Rev. 7:14).

Harry A. Ironside wrote a helpful little booklet about this problem called "Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: Ultra-Dispensationalism Examined in the Light of Holy Scripture." He deals largely with the

error of Bullingerism. This is available on the Internet at <http://www.brethrenonline.org/books/ultrad.htm>.

A more recent form of hyper-dispensationalism is presented in *ONE BOOK RIGHTLY DIVIDED: THE KEY TO UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE* BY DR. DOUGLAS STAUFFER (second edition 1999, McCowen Mills Publishers). Stauffer's teaching is largely the same as that which has been promoted by Dr. Peter Ruckman for many years, though Stauffer gives Ruckman no credit. He does mention that he received "the principles of right division" from Dave Reese. I sat under Reese's hyper-dispensational teaching in a course on prophecy at Tennessee Temple Bible School in the mid-1970s. It was a blessing when Reese left part way through the course, and we had the joy of finishing the rest of the course under the sound and profitable teaching of Dr. Bruce Lackey.

Stauffer's book comes with recommendations from some well-known independent Baptist preachers, including Evangelist Dennis Corle of Revival Fires and J. Wendell Runion of International Baptist Outreach Missions. In his glowing Foreword to Stauffer's book (which he calls a "spiritual masterpiece"), William Grady says that "this book will undoubtedly create shock waves within certain 'camps' of fundamentalism..." I doubt that the book will create shock waves within any camps, but it probably will create heretical shock waves in some individual lives and churches.

While there are many good things in Stauffer's book (i.e., he has a very excellent section on repentance, defining it properly as "a change of mind and heart attitude which leads to a change of actions" and warning that "too many sinners bow their heads and say the 'sinner's prayer' without any inward conviction or belief on the Lord Jesus Christ"), and while he accepts both baptism and the Lord's Supper as church ordinances, there can be no doubt that he is teaching a form of hyper-dispensationalism. Stauffer's hyper-dispensationalism is milder than some of the other approaches, but Dr. Stauffer's teaching will nonetheless produce confusion and division within churches.

According to Stauffer, Paul is THE spokesman for the church age (p. 17); the general epistles of Hebrews to Revelation, while containing some church age applications, are actually written for Great Tribulation saints (pp. 20, 27); salvation is obtained by works during the Tribulation (p. 23); Hebrews and James do not teach eternal security (pp. 23, 29); Peter did not preach the gospel of the grace of God (p. 26); the seven churches of Revelation 1-3 are not the body of Christ (p. 29); the epistle of first John teaches that salvation is through works (p. 56); the book of Acts was not given "to show how to establish the local church or its functions" (p. 72), Abraham had to keep his salvation through works (p. 175).

Stauffer even has a chapter warning about "hyper-dispensationalism"! In this, he conveniently redefines hyper-dispensationalism to mean something other than what he himself teaches. In fact, he sets up a straw man variety of hyper-dispensationalism that doesn't actually exist, or if it does exist, is very rare. He claims, for example, that a real hyper-dispensationalist teaches that the law is inapplicable today, but in reality, hyper-dispensationalists commonly teach that the law has applications for the church. He claims that hyper-dispensationalists exclude some portions of the Bible from study and application, but hyper-dispensationalists typically claim that all portions of the Bible have application to church age saints and are valuable for study. Stauffer defines hyper-dispensationalism as "any intentional false division of the Bible" (p. 149). Such a definition would be

impossible to employ for the simple fact that we cannot look into the heart of a man and see what his intentions are. In fact, hyper-dispensationalism is “any false division of the Bible” period, regardless of the motive of the one doing the teaching. A hyper-dispensationalist can be sincere or insincere. That is beside the point. The whole issue is whether he creates divisions in the Scriptures that should not be created. Stauffer’s book does precisely this. (He drops the word “intentional” in the third edition.)

Stauffer’s expanded third edition (2006) slightly modifies a few of these things, but it presents the same type of hyper-dispensationalism. He does not renounce anything he taught in previous editions. To me, his chief error is three-fold. *First, his error is in allotting the book of Acts and the General Epistles to a dispensation different from the church age.* In chapter 16 he divides the New Testament era into four dispensations -- the Age of Readiness (Matthew-John and Hebrews-Revelation 19), the Age of Church (Romans-Philemon), the Age of Kingdom (Revelation 20), and the Age of Eternity Future (Revelation 21-22). As for the book of Acts, Stauffer says, “The church should not base its existence or functions upon the book of Acts any more than upon a history book of the Soviet Union” (p. 72). The so-called Age of Readiness into which he lumps the General Epistles is a dispensation in which people are required to “seek the kingdom and to be ready whenever it might come” (p. 188). Stauffer claims that these books are not addressed directly to the church-age believer and that reading them is like reading mail intended for someone else (p. 28), and that they are primarily written for the Tribulation time (p. 47). To the contrary, the General Epistles are fully church-age revelations. The epistle of James was written for the churches in this present age as certainly and fully as Ephesians. There are no doctrinal contradictions between Paul’s epistles and the General Epistles. And the book of Acts, though we recognize its transitional character and the fact that there are things in it of a temporary nature (e.g., the apostolic miracles), it should be studied as church doctrine rather than a book applying to some different dispensation.

Second, Stauffer’s error is in setting up Paul as THE spokesman for the church and in contradiction to Peter and the other apostles and prophets who wrote the New Testament. He says, “God’s specific directions for the Church are found predominantly in the thirteen epistles that God used Paul to pen for the Church” (p. 22). While we know that Paul holds a unique place as the apostle of the Gentiles and he was given some wonderful revelations of church truth, he was not the only apostle who wrote for the churches, the non-Pauline New Testament epistles are as much for the Church as Paul’s are, Paul’s revelations in no way contradict those of the General Epistles, and he did not preach a different gospel from the others.

For more about the way of salvation in other dispensations, see “Salvation Is the Same in the Old Testament and the New Testament” by Bruce Lackey and “Salvation in the O.T. and the N.T. Follow-up.” These are available at the Bible version section of the End Times Apostasy Database at the Way of Life web site. These articles are also available in the *Fundamental Baptist CD-ROM Library*.

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